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ABSTRACT

Ninety students in a Hong Kong course in English as a second language were asked to list 20 topics they considered to be of interest for classroom study. The most popular topic areas, in descending order of popularity, were education, the students' home country (Hong Kong), family life, money, human relationships, marriage, nationalism and internationalism, crime, morality, women's role, politics, the supernatural, science and the future, health, and social problems. The students also indicated a wide variety of subtopics. The suggestions were surprising to their teachers, both in choice of topic area and in emphasis within topic area, and yielded important information about the interest of the students. A number of topics included in previous courses were left out of the students' choices. The technique can be useful to teachers as a way of knowing what will be of interest to a particular student group. (MSE)

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STUDENT-BASED TOPIC SELECTION FOR ESL COURSES

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Student-based Topic Selection for ESL Courses.

Joseph P Boyle, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

There is a saying among fishermen that you should not bait your hook with a strawberry just because you yourself like strawberries. In the same way, ESL/EFL teachers should not be too surprised when topics which seem tempting and interesting to them are considered by their students to be boring and dull. Just as the fish dictates the nature of the bait, so to some extent the student should dictate the nature of the topic. This article outlines an exercise in student-based selection of topics, as the basis for an ESL course for students in Hong Kong.

Structure, function and topic.

There are three common approaches to ESL course design. The traditional approach takes the structure of the language as the framework on which to build. More recently, language functions have been used as the starting point, with structures taught as they are needed to express the functions. A third approach is to begin with topics, and to weave the teaching of structures and functions into the materials related to topic areas.

The debate on a structural/grammatical versus functional/notional approach to language learning has been going on for a decade (Wilkins 1976 versus O'Neill 1977; Widdowson 1985 versus Swan 1985). Some of the issues have been examined well by such as Dobson (1979) and Willmott (1982). Objections to the functional approach have often come from those at the coal face - classroom teachers, who claim their confidence in their methodology has been undermined, when there is not yet sufficient proof of the validity of the new methods.

On the other hand, the advocates of a functional approach instance countries where English has been studied for years using a structural approach, yet the results in terms of basic communicative English remain very poor.

Most of the students involved in the present survey had learned English through a structural type of course. Many, through in-service courses, had also been exposed to the use of language functions as the pegs on which to hang the course. They found the idea strange of starting course design from anything other than structure or function. Accordingly, before selecting suitable topics, they were asked to take a critical look at both structural and functional approaches, and to list the strengths and weaknesses of each. Some of their comments follow.

Structure based courses.

Points made for a structural approach were: it is clear, ordered and logical; it gives rules which can be generalised; it enables first-language structural knowledge to be utilized, comparing and contrasting this with that of the target language; it has been a successful recipe for many foreign language learners in the past.

Points made against a structural approach were: it can be boring and dull; much of the content of such a course is meaningless or irrelevant to students' interests or needs; it has its origin in the study of the Classics, dead languages; it ignores the skill aspect of language learning.

Function based courses.

Points made for a functional approach were: it is different and more interesting; the textbooks are brighter and more varied; it encourages the use of the language; it deals with situations that are relevant to real-life.

Points made against a functional approach were: it has no logical progression or grading of material; it is confusing, as it treats points of different syntactic and lexical complexity all together; it leads to rote learning of lists of examples for functions; it produces a course which as a whole lacks solidity, even though individual classes may be interesting.

When this critical appraisal had been completed, the students seemed more willing to contemplate other frameworks, specifically topic areas, which might be used as a basis for the course design.

Topics.

The impetus to reexamine our topic areas had originally come from the students, who commented in a course-assessment questionnaire that some of the topics in the previous year's course had been frankly boring. This surprised the teachers who had chosen the topics with some care and had considered them interesting.

A total of 90 students were asked to give lists of 20 topics which they considered would be of interest in an English skills course. The results were illuminating for the teachers, as much for the topics the students did not think suitable, as for those they did.

The topics chosen by the students are listed below, in order of popularity. Though some of the topics are more appropriate to Hong Kong, many of them will be of interest and use to teachers, and indeed to text-book writers and publishers, in other parts of the world.

First is given the very broad topic area. The number after this in brackets represents the number of students who suggested something in this area. Next the particular sub-topics mentioned by several are specified.

1. Education. (90). The purpose of education./ The local educational system./ Coeducation versus sex separation./ Technical versus academic education./ The relationship between students and teachers./ Drop-outs./ Methods of punishment./ School uniform./ The best time for classes./ Examinations./ Fees.

2. My Country. (46). The character of Hong Kong people./ The pros. and cons. of life in Hong Kong./ Shopping./ Entertainment./ Overcrowding./ Pollution./ The influence of Western culture on Hong Kong./ The boat-people./ Taking a tourist on a one-day tour.

3. Family Life. (43). Western versus Eastern attitudes./ Children./ Size of family./ Discipline./ Child abuse./ Housing./ Living conditions./ Interior decoration./ Safety in the home.

4. Money. (32). Attitudes to money./ How achieve a fair distribution?/ Rich and poor./ The level of taxation./ Legal and illegal gambling./ The influence of credit cards.

5. Human Relationships. (30). Harmony in relationships./ Friendship./ Putting on masks./ Good manners./ Patience./ Trust./ How to improve our personality./ Loneliness, feeling left out.

6. Marriage. (28). New responsibilities./ The effect of marriage on career./ Marriage versus single life./ Is it necessary?/ Qualities to be looked for in a spouse./ Wife abuse./ Divorce.

7. Nationalism/Internationalism. (28). Hong Kong's independence and the 1997 question./ Influence of other countries on Hong Kong, especially U.K., U.S.A., Japan./ Effect of climate on national characteristics./ Racial discrimination./ International terrorism./ International events and organisations.

8. Crime. (22). Critical look at the police force./ Crime in Hong Kong./ Triad societies./ Prisons./ Interest in detective stories and films./ Have you ever been the victim of a crime?

9. Morality. (20). Is honesty really the best policy?/ Moral education./ Corruption and the ICAC (Independent Commission against Corruption)./ Standing out against the crowd./ Sex education./ Homosexuality./ AIDS./ Abortion./ Suicide./ Euthanasia.

10. Womens' role. (18). Male chauvinism./ Sex discrimination./ Women's lib./ Would you be a man or woman by choice?/ Changes in women's status./ Career woman versus housewife./ Beauty pageants.

11. Politics. (17). Democracy versus dictatorship./ Socialism versus capitalism./ Keeping up with current affairs./ Pressure groups in society./ A political figure I admire.

12. The supernatural. (16). Ghosts./ Superstitions./ Fortune telling./ The different world religions./ Is there a God?/ Life after death.

13. Science and the future. (15). The machine age./ Computers./The study of space./ Inventions of the future./ Life in the year 2000 and 3000./ Nuclear energy./ Is science beneficial or harmful to man?

14. Health. (14). Physical illness and mental illness./ Should there be a free health service?/ Finding a cure for cancer./ Getting fat./ Exercise, jogging./ Health clubs.

15. Social Problems. (14). The handicapped, physically and mentally./ Vietnamese refugees and illegal immigrants from China./ Prostitutes and the tourist trade./ The unemployed./ The social security system.

These were the topics which received most votes. Other topics which were suggested by smaller numbers of students will not be detailed. The categorisation was to some extent arbitrary, as there was obviously some overlap between topics, for example between morality and social problems, or between politics and nationalism/internationalism. But in general there was agreement about the categorisation of sub-topics within broad topic areas.

Teachers' reaction to student choices.

Though many of the topics chosen by the students coincided with teacher expectations, there were some surprises both in choice of topic areas and of emphasis within topic areas. Some examples are given.

1. Education.

Though it was foreseen that this would be popular, it was not expected to be such an overwhelmingly popular choice. The 100% choice of this topic served to remind teachers that, though it had perhaps become dull for them, this was not the case for students.

A couple of the sub-topics were unexpected: coeducation, because its value seemed to many teachers to be generally accepted, and school uniform, because it seemed an unimportant matter, given the many more substantial questions in the area of education. However, in Hong Kong, as in many other countries, coeducation is not a settled issue. When students are asked to go into groups in language classes, it is noticeable how the males and females will tend to go with their own sex, unless dragooned into the opposite by the teacher. As for school uniforms, sensitivity about this question is perhaps the legacy of Hong Kong's position as a British colony.

2. My country.

It was significant that not many wanted to hear about the customs and culture of America or Britain or of other countries, or to be taken on the usual text-book tours of New York or London. It was their own homeland of Hong Kong which they wanted to talk about.

4. Money.

Here teachers had expected interest in the question of how to make money, often said to be the main preoccupation of Hong Kong people.

There was surprise, therefore, when students expressed more interest in such matters as the unequal division of material goods and how to achieve a fairer distribution of wealth.

5. Human relationships.

There was a different emphasis here from the kind of topics teachers usually included in this area. None of the students suggested sex or male/female relationships as a topic, whereas many students opted for a question which is dear to the heart of Asians, namely harmony and lack of friction in relationships.

7. Nationalism/Internationalism.

Chinese are sometimes considered as being rather narrowly nationalistic. However, for the Chinese students surveyed here at any rate, questions of international concern were a fairly popular choice. No doubt current interest in the question of 1997, when Hong Kong will be returned to mainland China, has something to do with this.

8. Crime.

Instead of concentration on the criminal elements in society, an unexpected interest was expressed in crime within the police force. On reflection, this should not have been too surprising, given past cases of large-scale corruption in the Hong Kong police force.

9. Morality.

The range of sub-topics suggested was wider than teachers would have expected, reflecting the broadly inclusive understanding of the subject among Chinese, whose philosophers have traditionally been more interested in ethical rather than physical questions.

12. The supernatural.

Here, though there was some interest expressed in the central questions of religion and comparative religion, the main preoccupation

was rather with what might be called fringe questions, like superstitions, ghosts, and above all, fortune-telling.

15. Social problems.

Compared with what might be found among students in other cultures and situations, there was a surprising lack of interest in local social problems, no doubt, partly because Chinese society traditionally absorbs many of these problems into the family setting.

Student reaction to teachers' choices.

Since the students had criticised the topic areas used in past courses as being boring, teachers were interested to see which of the topics they normally included received little or no mention in the students' choice of potentially interesting topics. Notable were the following 10 topics.

1. Accidents: road, rail, ship, air.
2. Natural disasters: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods.
3. War and its effects.
4. The problem of overpopulation in the world.
5. Capital punishment.
6. Drug taking.
7. The pressures of city life.
8. Advertising.
9. Travel, holidays.
10. Sports.

Comments.

1-3. Topics like accidents, natural disasters, and war, are probably more real for older people, who have lived through them. It seems that younger people tend to have limited interest in such questions, especially if they have never been personally close to the problems.

4-5. Rather surprisingly, living next to a country with a population of a billion people, and where capital punishment is quite regular, few of the Hong Kong students felt these problems were of very great interest.

6. Though Hong Kong is certainly one of the big centres for the international drug trade, drug use among university students is very rare, and it is not a subject which concerns them much.

7. Whereas this topic may indeed be relevant for non Hong Kong people, who find the pressure of life in this city difficult to manage, it is of less interest to the local residents who cope much better with the hustle and congestion.

8. Advertising is a standard topic in text books for learners of English, perhaps because material is so easy to find. However, this group of students at any rate expressed very little interest in the topic. This was surprising in a society which is so consumer oriented.

9-10. With regard to the last two topics, travel/holidays and sports, again though many of the students did travel and did play sports, for some reason they gave them low priority as suitable topics for treatment in an English class.

Conclusion.

The exercise of student-teacher collaboration outlined in this article is comparatively simple to do and yields useful and sometimes surprising results. The preliminary discussion with students on structural and functional approaches to course design helps clear any confusion on what is meant by topic area, as opposed to language structure or function. Teachers will no doubt differ on the advisability of including topic areas which are 'good for' the students, whether the student are interested in them or not. But all teachers presumably would agree on the value of knowing which topics interest a particular group of students and which do not. The bait should suit the fish.

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